

The Laying-On of Paws



If your outgoing pet thrives on attention, you can maximize your bonding time together—and make a profound contribution to your community—by becoming therapy partners. Across the country, these volunteer teams dedicate themselves to lifting spirits at hospitals, nursing homes, and anywhere else they're needed. By Julia Szabo

Dynamic Duos Volunteering their time wherever help is needed, trained therapy animals and their human partners are helping to make the world a healthier place

"It's so exciting when you visit a pediatrics ward and you can just see the light come on in the kids' eyes," says Sue Nastasi, who trains candidates for certification with New York's Good Dog Foundation (thegooddogfoundation.org). Those visits do more than boost morale; they motivate people undergoing painful physical rehabilitation. "Brushing a dog is exercise," points out Good Dog founder Rachel McPherson, "but it's so much fun that patients forget they're working!" Delta Society (deltasociety.org) has registered Pet Partners since 1990; its mission is "Improving Human Health through Service and Therapy Animals." That includes mental health: In Eugene, Ore., Cindy Ehlers of PAAWS (peopleandanimalswhoserve.org) helps those suffering from emotional trauma. By her side is her partner, Tikva (above), a keeshond. In the wake of September 11, 2001, Tikva was a fixture at Ground Zero, bestowing hugs and licking tears from the faces of firefighters, rescue workers, and the bereaved. In this line of work, size and pedigree don't matter: One of Good Dog's stars is Fidel, a 10-pound papillon, while Bide-A-Wee (bideawee.org), a New York City animal shelter that also certifies therapy partners, is proud to have graduated a 110-pound formerly stray mutt named Boris, a rottweiler mix. Even species is no obstacle: Bide-A-Wee has cats on its team; Delta has registered therapy rabbits and parrots. All that's required is a well-trained pet and a compassionate human willing to spend time in exchange for enormous spiritual reward. Says Sue Grundfest of Bide-A-Wee, who volunteers every weekend with her poodle, Coco, "It's absolutely the most positive, uplifting part of my week." CL